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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 November 1985

**Soviet Policy on Jewish Emigration--
A Change in the Offing?**

SUMMARY

In the run-up to the US-Soviet meeting in Geneva, the Soviet regime has been taking a two-track approach on Jewish emigration and other human rights issues. In public and diplomatic channels the regime has attempted to warn the US away from the issue altogether.

Gorbachev has sharply criticized US human rights performance, insisting the USSR has nothing to be ashamed about on the issue and publicly claiming that Jews have more rights in the USSR than anywhere. He is said to be compiling a list of alleged US violations to be used at Geneva.

Soviet interlocutors have passed the word that Gorbachev does not want to discuss Jewish emigration in Geneva, while Soviet diplomats

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and questions may be directed to the [redacted] Chief, Domestic Policy Division [redacted]

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have been instructed to indicate to their Western contacts that a US approach on human rights is futile and a waste of time.

On the other hand the regime has used back channel messengers. [redacted]

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[redacted] to hint that a policy shift on emigration is being considered by Gorbachev and that he will make other gestures on human rights to create a better atmosphere in Geneva.

The regime took the unusual step in late January to begin a dialogue on the emigration issue with officials of the World Jewish Congress and, indirectly, the Peres government in Israel. [redacted]

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[redacted] Gorbachev might be willing to allow freer Jewish emigration and possibly the start of direct emigration flights to Israel.

Yelena Bonner, a Jewish dissident and wife of Andrey Sakharov, evidently will be allowed abroad for medical treatment and a Soviet told the US Embassy in Moscow that dissident refuseniks Anatoliy Shcharanskiy, Ida Nudel and "others" will be freed as a "humanitarian gesture" by Gorbachev.

These officially inspired hints of a forthcoming change have achieved at least some short term gain for the Soviet regime.

The promise of concessions itself has bought gestures of goodwill from the World Jewish Congress--toning down criticism of the Soviets--and the Peres government is interested in the suggestion the USSR could participate in an international forum on the Arab-Israeli question.

Dangling the prospect of direct and higher emigration and hinting at other moves on human rights helps Moscow's argument that human rights should be excluded from the Geneva discussions.

Public diplomacy aside, Gorbachev probably calculates that there are gains in allowing direct flights of greater numbers of Soviet Jews to Israel. Given the recent low levels of Jewish emigration--about a thousand a year since 1980--he can agree to a substantial increase without coming close to the high emigration rates of the mid-to-late 1970s.

Direct Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel might even be seen as a way to drive a wedge between US and Israeli perspectives on emigration and other issues.

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[REDACTED]

Higher Jewish emigration holds the possibility that Jewish support for restrictions on US-Soviet trade--e.g., Jackson-Vanik--will be eroded and that Jewish lobbying on behalf of Soviet Jews will decrease.

The regime may calculate that allowing for greater emigration and some concessions on other human rights issues will preempt international critics and make it easier to move on dissidents in the future.

So far, there have been no concrete, overt steps undertaken by Gorbachev to alter Soviet emigration policy. The reason likely is tied to their uncertainty about US-Soviet relations and the impact of such moves on Soviet-Arab relations. Moscow almost certainly understands that there would be strong Arab protests--as there were in the late 1970s--against increased Jewish emigration to Israel. Gorbachev, moreover, rejects direct US efforts to pressure him on this issue, and may believe that US interest on emigration gives him some potential leverage. He probably does not yet know whether playing this card will be worth the effort. He undoubtedly assumes the issue will come up in his meeting with the President, and [REDACTED] is preparing to counter attack aggressively. At the same time, however, he is likely to use the occasion to assess what long term gains can be realized by showing more flexibility.

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Background

The Soviet regime's decisions on emigration have typically been governed by policy considerations of the moment--both foreign and domestic. In the early 1970s, for example, the regime determined that freer emigration would give impetus to a broad array of political and economic issues with the United States--such as the SALT I agreement and the commitment to increase bilateral trade. [REDACTED]

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Despite recognizing the linkage of emigration to these issues, however, the Soviets were not willing to accept US efforts publicly to tie the two. They quickly denounced the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson Amendments to the US Trade Act, which required a high level of Jewish emigration as a condition for extending most-favored-nation treatment and gaining credits, as unacceptable interference in the USSR's internal affairs. To make the point, the number of Israeli exit visas was quickly cut; by 1975 emigration was only about one-third of that in 1973. In the late 1970s, however, despite stepped up harassment, arrests, and trials of prominent Jewish dissidents such as Anatoliy Shcharanskiy, the regime allowed the rate of Jewish emigration to rise dramatically. By 1979 it had reached an alltime high of 50,460 visas issued. Moscow may have thought freer emigration would help conclude a SALT II agreement and be particularly beneficial in the ratification process. The Soviet were also pushing for increased trade with the United States, and easing emigration may have been intended to forestall problems with US policymakers who had earlier linked trade and emigration. It is also possible that the regime saw this as a way to clear out some of its perceived trouble-makers while getting credit for it abroad. [REDACTED]

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By 1980 Moscow's calculations had evidently changed. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US refusal to ratify SALT II, the Olympic boycott and the suspension of cultural and scientific exchanges led to a sharp deterioration in relations. With nothing to gain from using emigration as an inducement, emigration plummeted for Jews, Armenians and Germans. According to US Government and United Nations statistics, the 1980 high of 6,109 Armenians receiving exit permission was reduced to 88 by 1984. German emigration fell from 6,947 visas issued in 1979 to only 910 in 1984. Jewish emigration dropped from over 50,000 in 1979 to 896 in 1984. [REDACTED]

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In 1982 Soviet emigration officials began telling applicants that "Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union has come to an end." In 1983, apparently to publicize this decision, the authorities established the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public. Soviet officials also began implying to foreign governments that emigration had ended, even as a "gesture." In April 1983, [REDACTED] increase in Jewish emigration was unlikely because past Soviet experience with such gestures had been unsatisfactory. [REDACTED]

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Counterattack under Gorbachev

With the accession of Gorbachev, the regime went on the offensive. [REDACTED]

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[redacted] The US Embassy in Moscow also reported in September that the number of items on Soviet television or in the press on alleged US human rights violations was on the increase. [redacted]

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Strident criticism of US human rights performance was accompanied by a prickly response to cases raised by the US and its allies.

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Gorbachev has personally taken the offensive on the issue of Soviet human rights and emigration policies. During a meeting with a visiting US Congressional delegation in September 1985, he sharply criticized the US failure to ratify various international human rights conventions, and later that month told French television that the USSR has nothing to be ashamed of on human rights. He even raised the issue of Shcharanskiy--which he denied was a human rights issue--and said that he would be glad to hear of Jews enjoying anywhere such political and other rights as they have in the USSR.

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Warns US Away From Issue

Behind the bluster there have been heavy handed warnings that Gorbachev and his lieutenants wanted to avoid the issue altogether in discussions with the US.

In July, for example, Arbatov told [redacted] that Gorbachev does not want to discuss the matter of Jewish emigration at the meeting in November.

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At the same time a Soviet diplomat in the US commented that the Soviets hoped that then newly appointed Foreign Minister Shevardnadze would not encounter polemics on human rights violations in discussions with the US Secretary of State.

In September, a senior official of the party Central Committee, in the US on a pre-Geneva fact finding mission, warned [redacted] that the issue of Soviet Jewish emigration could hamper a successful outcome to the meeting.

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In mid-October, a knowledgeable Soviet diplomat suggested Gorbachev would be unyielding on this issue, and said that if the US insists on raising the human rights issue at the Geneva talks or at any future meeting, Gorbachev will use his own comprehensive file on alleged human rights violations in the US to counter the charges.

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[REDACTED]

Hints of Flexibility

While continuing to project a public and diplomatic hardline on human rights, the regime [REDACTED] began in early 1985 to signal the possibility of a change in emigration policy. It took the unusual step in late January of inviting the head of the World Jewish Congress to Moscow to discuss the issue. At about the same time, the State Bank chairman told a US official that if bilateral relations improve, emigration "would not be a great problem." It has also played on the interest of some in the Israeli government who are anxious to work out an arrangement that would not only provide for freer Soviet Jewish emigration but would direct the emigration to Israel. [REDACTED]

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Dialogue with the WJC. [REDACTED] discussions in Moscow between Soviet officials, and--with Israel's blessings--the World Jewish Congress seemed to progress through mid-July 1985. [REDACTED]

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World Jewish Congress officials returned to Moscow in September to resume the dialogue, even though the Soviets had not fulfilled the promises the WJC had expected. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Despite the assurances, the Soviets have not yet taken any concrete steps to increase emigration. The regime has limited itself to easing restrictions on the Sakharovs. Sakharov and Bonner were allowed to call relatives in the United States and Bonner evidently will be allowed to go abroad for medical treatment. [REDACTED]

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Shcharanskiy and other refuseniks may be freed soon. [REDACTED]

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Israeli Interest. The Soviets have been able to engage Israeli support by playing on Israel's--and its intermediaries--concern about Soviet Jewish emigration and the parallel concern that Israel be the destination of any new emigration. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Israel's Minister of Immigrant Absorption, Yaacov Tsur, has also articulated to US officials the Israeli interest in eliminating Soviet Jewish emigration to the US, pointing out that Jews lose US refugee status and cannot later go to the US if they choose Israel first. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, it is still an open question whether behind the atmospherics there is real progress on the issue of Jewish emigration to Israel. Indeed, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials and the public lobbies in Israel for Soviet Jewry are skeptical that the Soviets are prepared to be flexible on Jewish emigration. Last month, MFA officials responsible for Soviet affairs told US officials that they see no evidence to support hopes that there might be a significant increase in Soviet Jewish emigration. Apparently aware of MFA views, the Soviet regime has been dealing directly with the Prime Minister's office on the issue. [REDACTED]

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Related Moves to Project Flexibility

In the past week or so the Soviets have been dropping even more tantalizing hints that they are willing to resolve some of the more contentious human rights cases--many of which involve Soviet Jews. One example is the story that Yelena Bonner has been given permission to go abroad for medical treatment. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Prospects

Gorbachev probably sees some advantage in allowing direct emigration of greater numbers of Soviet Jews. Indeed, the recent levels of Soviet Jewish emigration are so low--about a thousand a year since 1980--that even a substantial increase would pale in comparison to the massive emigration of the 1970s.

Direct Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel might even be seen as a way to drive a wedge between different US and Israeli perspectives on emigration.

Gorbachev can also defuse the issue of emigration as a bilateral irritant by dealing with third partners.

At home, he can defuse the refusenik issue by holding out the promise of higher emigration in return for conformity while getting rid of others unwilling to conform. The regime has effectively used emigration in the past to divide and decapitate the dissident movement.

The regime might also calculate that greater emigration and some concessions on other human rights issues would disarm its international critics and allow Moscow, if necessary, to move more freely in the future.

So far, however, the Soviets have not yet moved ahead on anything more than symbolic gestures. Concern about the impact of such moves on Soviet-Arab relations is probably a factor. Moscow certainly understands that there would be strong protests against increased Jewish emigration to Israel from its Arab allies. Previous Soviet emigration policy suggest that, nonetheless, this is not an overriding concern. Gorbachev's uncertainty about the future of US-Soviet relations is probably a further reason. While he rejects direct US efforts to pressure him on this issue, Gorbachev may believe that US interest on emigration gives him some potential leverage. He undoubtedly assumes the issue will come up in his meeting with the President, and [REDACTED] is preparing to counterattack aggressively. He will also, however, likely use the occasion to assess what long term gains can be realized by showing more flexibility.

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